Best Practices in Civic Education: Changes in Students' Civic Outcomes

Amy K. Syvertsen*, Constance A. Flanagan, & Michael D. Stout

The Pennsylvania State University

* syvertsen@psu.edu

CIRCLE WORKING PAPER 57

AUGUST 2007

CIRCLE
The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement

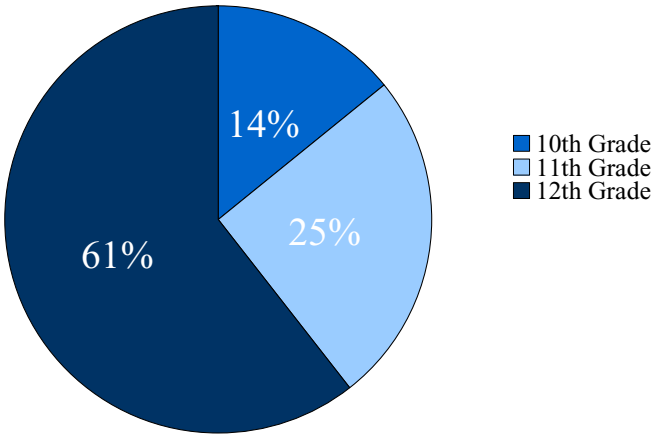
The power of civic education to elicit positive student outcomes has been empirically documented. However, the field is only now beginning to understand the causal processes that bring about these positive changes in young people. *The Civic Mission of Schools* report commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE (2003) lays out six "promising approaches" to civic education. These practices emphasize the need for instruction that is relevant to young people (i.e., links young people's interests to political contexts), provides opportunities for practice, and that moves beyond rote learning praxis. A growing body of evidence suggests that these approaches to civic education yield positive, lasting outcomes in young people (see CIRCLE, 2007). For example, research has found that deliberative classroom discussions are positively associated with interest in politics, political knowledge, and feelings of political efficacy (Feldman, Pask, Romer, & Hall Jamieson, in press; McDevitt, Kiousis, Wu, Losch, & Ripley, 2003). The goal of this project is to examine the association between activities regularly used in civic education courses (e.g., staging a mock election) and their impact on key student outcomes. By linking classroom praxis to outcomes, we intend to provide evidence supporting best practices in civic education.

METHODOLOGY

The data used to the present study were gathered from two waves of surveys with 1,670 students ages 14-19 from 80 social studies classes in the United States. Classes were recruited from a pool of teachers throughout one mid-Atlantic state who had expressed interest in training in an election-based curriculum. Teachers and students completed a pre-test at the beginning of the semester (early to mid-September) and a post-test at the end (late-November to mid-December) leaving a 2.5 to 3.5 month lapse between the points of data collection over the course of which the national election occurred. The student and teacher survey instruments used at both time points consisted of a combination of open-ended and Likert-type items. Items on the student survey were counterbalanced to ensure that all questions had an equal chance of being answered. Questionnaires were distributed to students during a 45-minute class period at each occasion of measurement.

The study was originally designed as a randomized evaluation of a civics curriculum called Student Voices in the Campaign (for additional information on the program evaluation, see Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007). The current study, however, does not evaluate that particular program. Rather, we look at a range of usual practices that social studies teachers report

Figure 1. *Breakdown of sample by grade.*



using and assess whether various practices had a demonstrable impact on targeted civic outcomes for students. The practices which we assess are common practices and activities that are regularly found in standard civic education curricula and classrooms.

PARTICIPANTS

In total 80 teachers and 1,670 students completed surveys at the beginning and end of the semester. The mean age of the students was 16.63 years (SD = .85). Students were in grades 10, 11, and 12. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of students were in the 12th grade, which research has shown to be the optimal grade for civic education (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Fifty percent of the students were female. The ethnic background of the participants was 92% European-, 6% African-, 3% Hispanic-, 3% Native-, and 2% Asian-American. An additional 2% of the participants identified as being of some other ethnicity. Note that percentages do not add up to 100% as several students indicated multiple ethnicities. These ethnic breakdowns reflect the overall student population in the school districts in the study.

Adolescents' socioeconomic status (SES) was calculated based on their reports of mother / female guardian's highest educational level. Students reported that their mother / female guardian's highest level of education was: high school or less (43%), technical or vocational training (7%), 2-year college degree (12%), 4-year college degree (24%), graduate degree (14%).

Teachers in the sample had a wide-range of teaching experience with careers ranging from 2 months to 37 years (M ≈ 14 years; Mode = 5 years). Thirty-eight percent of the teachers were female. The majority of teachers described the class participating in this study as having mixed abilities (83%), while 16% were identified as AP/ Gifted and 1% were considered remedial. Eight percent of the teachers indicated that the class in which this study took place was required to fulfill a graduation requirement.

MEASURES

Teachers reported (using a long list) on which practices they used in their classes over the course of the Fall 2004 semester. In order to match exposure to a specific activity with student outcomes, the teachers' reports were related to the students' reports of various civic outcomes. Rather than matching each individual activity with a specific student outcome, scales were created (i.e., like items were grouped to create a single measure). For example, teachers were asked four separate questions concerning whether the students in their class participated in field trips to Washington, DC, the state capitol, local government offices, and polling stations. Instead of testing whether a field trip to each unique locale made students more trusting of elected officials, field trips to all four locations were grouped into a single Field Trip measure which, in turn, was used to measure the impact of field trips on students' trust for elected officials.

The research team created the instructional practice scales based on theory and the common underlying skill or disposition targeted by the activity. To get a score on each measure, the number of activities for which the teacher responded "yes" was summed. The various instructional practice scales fit under three broad categories which seek to enhance:

Civic Skills
* Communication Skills
* Democratic Deliberation
* Critical Analysis of Political Information

Civic Engagement
* Election Simulation
* Electoral Engagement
* Alternative Engagement

Awareness of Civic Issues and Concepts
* Local Issues
* Youth Issues
* Civic Education Concepts
* International Issues
* Contested Issues
* Current National Events.

These measures are described in more detail in Tables 1, 3, and 5 later in this report.

When there was an explicit hypothesis about the outcome of a specific activity, the activity was entered into the analysis independently. For example, if we thought – over and above all of the other field trips – that a trip to Washington would make students more likely to express interest in a political career, we tested the affect of a "field trip to Washington" independently from all of the other field trip locations.

The measures used to assess students' civic outcomes have been discussed in detail in the *CIRCLE Working Paper, Civic Measurement Models: Tapping Adolescents' Civic Engagement* (Flanagan, Syvertsen, & Stout, 2007). Readers are directed to this piece for detailed information on the psychometric properties (e.g., alpha coefficient, individual item factor loadings) and the specific items that make up each of the student outcome scales used in this report.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

The participants in this study are nested within classrooms which implies that the students within each class may be more similar to one another than they are to students in other classes. Thus, it is important to analyze the data both for individual students and at the classroom level. In order to adjust for the nested nature of the data in this study, the results were analyzed using a multilevel regression model. The two levels are: student (level 1) and classroom (level 2). In addition to the control for students nested within classrooms, we have added another stringent test: In each analysis of a civic outcome at the end of the semester, we have controlled for that variable at the beginning of the semester. For example, to understand whether there was a gain in students' sense of political voice over the semester, we controlled for the level of political voice they reported at the beginning of the semester. The analyses also control for students' attention to the national election at pre-test, and their mother's education. Prior attention to the national election (as measured at pre-test) was included as a covariate in this study to minimize the influence of pre-test differences in general political engagement and interest. Similarly, mother's education was included as a covariate to control for differences in civic interest and opportunities associated with parental education.

The combination of teacher and student reports, the multilevel design, and inclusion of prior political interest and mother's education as covariates reflect considerable rigor in the analyses reported in this paper. The results of these analyses can be used to inform civic education standards and practices.

We have organized the results into four sections: (1) Civic Skill, (2) Civic Engagement, (3) Awareness of Civic Issues and Concepts, and (4) Specific Activities. Each section of the report includes a table outlining the instructional practices included in the measures, a graph summarizing the percentage of teachers who used each practice during the Fall 2004 semester, and a table summarizing the multilevel regressions. The results show whether a particular practice (as reported by the teacher) predicts change in students' civic outcomes (as measured in the pre-/post-test student data). When interpreting the results of these analyses, it is important to keep in mind the relatively short interval of time between the two times of measurement. Further, in terms of generalizability, it is important to note that these data were collected during a semester when a national election campaign was taking place. Thus, it is unclear whether these same results can be generalized to other semesters (with or without an election).

CIVIC SKILLS

Application exercises provide young people with opportunities to practice and hone their civic skills. Three measures – described in Table 1 – were created to assess the extent to which teachers engage their students in skill building activities. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of teachers who reported using each of the activities. Note that the majority of teachers reported doing most of the activities included in the Democratic Deliberation and Critical Analysis scales.

TABLE 1. CIVIC SKILLS MEASURES.

Civic Skills Measures	
Stem: Did students in this class…	
Communication Skills	write a paper on a political issue?
	learn how to plan and carry out a survey of community residents and/or other students in their school?
	write a letter (mock or real) to the editor of a newspaper?
	write a letter (mock or real) to a newly elected official to express their ideas/concerns?
	give in-class oral presentations about an issue?
	learn to support their opinions with facts?
Democratic Deliberation	participate in a deliberative dialogue process?
	learn how to actively listen to points of view that are different from their own?
	reach a consensus on the political issues that are most important to the class as a whole?
	learn how to find common ground with people who disagree with them?
	learn how to work with other students with whom they have strong disagreements?
Critical Analyses of Political Information	analyze political ads?
	check the "facts" in political ads?
	critique the messages in political ads?
	evaluate a political candidate's website?
	learn to compare and contrast candidates' positions?
	learn about or discuss the difference between facts and opinions?

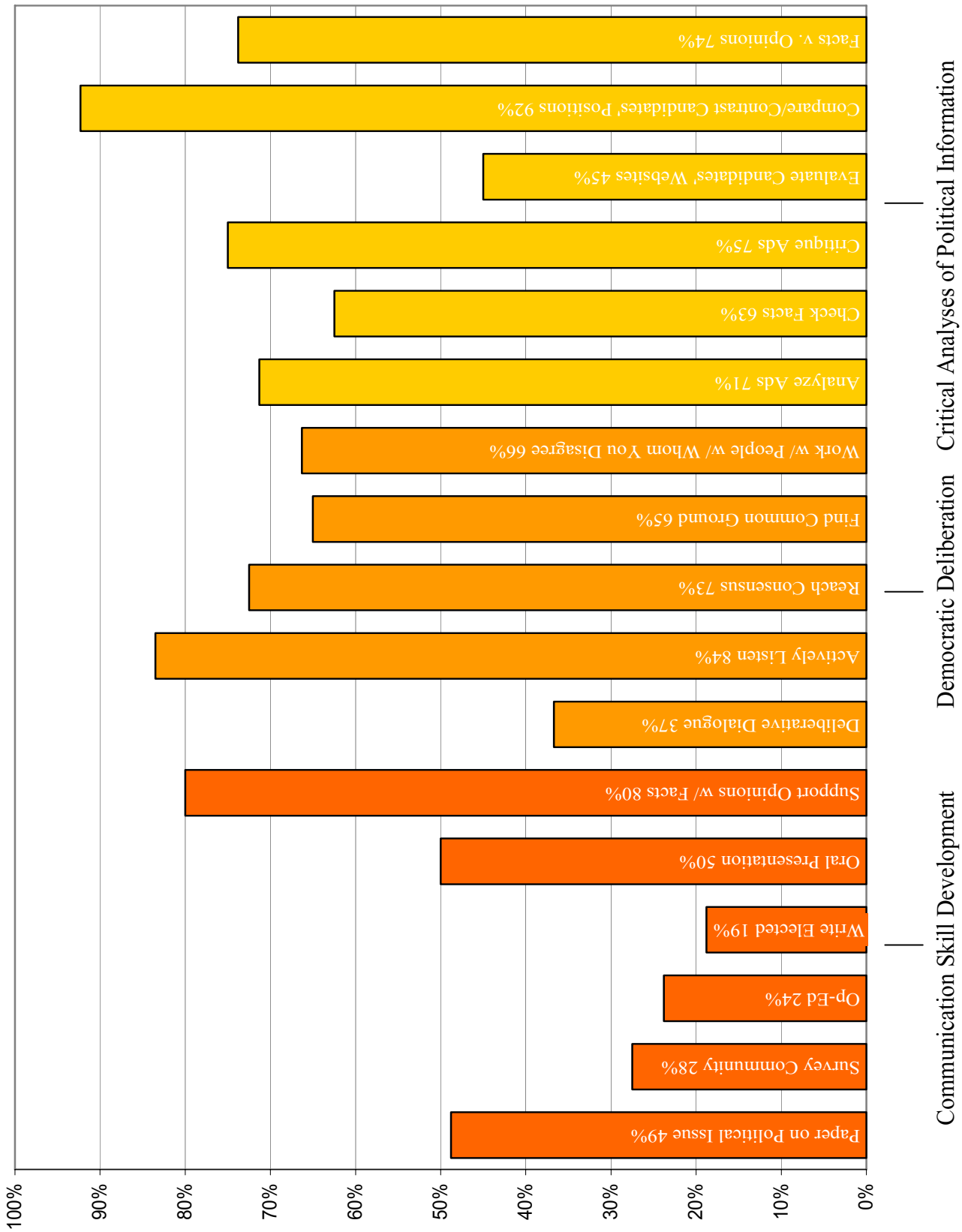


Figure 2. *Percentage of teachers who used civic skill building activities in the Fall 2004 semester.*

Table 2. *Summary of multilevel regression analyses.*

		Student Outcomes																	
		Political Voice	Civic Action	Accountability	Social Trust	Listen Even When I Disagree	Communication: Parent	Communication: Teacher	Communication: Friend	Communication: Classmate	Critical Consumer	Informed Vote	Unconditional Support	Trust Elected Officials	Traditional Media Outlets	Contemporary Media Outlets	Trust Media	Trust Ads	Trust Candidates' Websites
Teacher Practices	Communication	–	o	o															
	Democratic Deliberation				o	o	o	+	+	+									
	Critical Analysis										–	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	+

Legend. + = positive relationship, significant at $p \leq .10$.
– = negative relationship, significant at $p \leq .10$.
o = relationship was tested, not significant at $p \leq .10$.
Empty Cell = relationship was not tested.

Notes. The instructional practice measures listed on the y-axis are based on teachers' self-report, while the outcome measures listed vertically on the x-axis are based on students' self-report. The hypotheses tested in this report were developed based on theory and prior research. All of the multilevel regressions reported in this table control for students' pre-test score on the measure of interest, students' self-reported interest in the national election (as measured at pre-test), and their mother's educational level.

The results of the analyses are summarized in Table 2. Controlling for mother's education and students' prior interest in the election, we found that communication skill building activities negatively impacted students' assessments of their abilities to share their opinions and mobilize others around issues that are important to them (i.e., political voice). While this result runs counter to our hypothesis that communication skill building should promote political voice, it is plausible that over the course of the semester students became more realistic in their judgments of their ability and desire to voice their political opinions, thus, resulting in the negative relationship. Likewise, we found that critical analysis activities such as analyzing political ads negatively predicted students' post-test assessments of their ability to critically analyze political information. It may be that, prior to receiving explicit instruction on how to evaluate the legitimacy of political information,

TABLE 3. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MEASURES.

Civic Engagement Measures	
Stem: Did students in this class...	
Engagement with Local Issues	interview community members to identify what political issues are important to them?
	have a visit from local candidates currently running for office?
Participate in a Field Trip	take a field trip to government offices in Washington, D.C.?
	take a field trip to state capitol building?
	take a field trip to local government offices?
	take a field trip to local polling site?
Election Simulation	participate in a mock election?
	participate in a mock debate?
	create an ad about a political candidate or issue?
Alternative Forms of Engagement	discuss concrete ways other than voting that they can do to have a voice in political affairs?
Engagement in Electoral Politics	brainstorm ideas that could be done in the future to increase voter turnout?
	examine and interpret data about voting patterns?
	examine the results of the election and analyze voting patterns?
	learn about or discuss candidates running for office in the state?
Stem: Did you do any of the following in the class that is participating in this study?	
	Acquaint students with the voting process (i.e., what to do inside the voting booth).
	Invite a political candidate into your class to answer student questions.
	Require students to watch a presidential debate.
	Discuss the presidential debate(s) in class.

students over-rated their ability to critically analyze political information. In other words, the decline over the course of the semester in students' self-assessments may reflect a higher standard and greater accuracy. We did find, however, that critical analysis activities positively predicted students' trust of candidates' websites.

Political opinions, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by the conversations young people have with others. Activities thought to promote students' general democratic dispositions such as learning how to actively listen to diverse viewpoints resulted in gains in communication about political issues and current events with teachers, friends, and classmates. However, these practices did not spill over into students' conversations with their parents.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Teachers use a variety of practices to engage their students in thinking about and participating in electoral politics (see Table 3). Figure 3 presents the percent of teachers who reported doing each of the activities in these engagement measures. Table 4 summarizes the multilevel regressions. Teachers who indicated that they organized a mock election in their class were asked a series of follow-up questions about the types of activities they integrated into the mock election. The percent of teachers who did each activity as part of the mock election is presented in Figure 4.

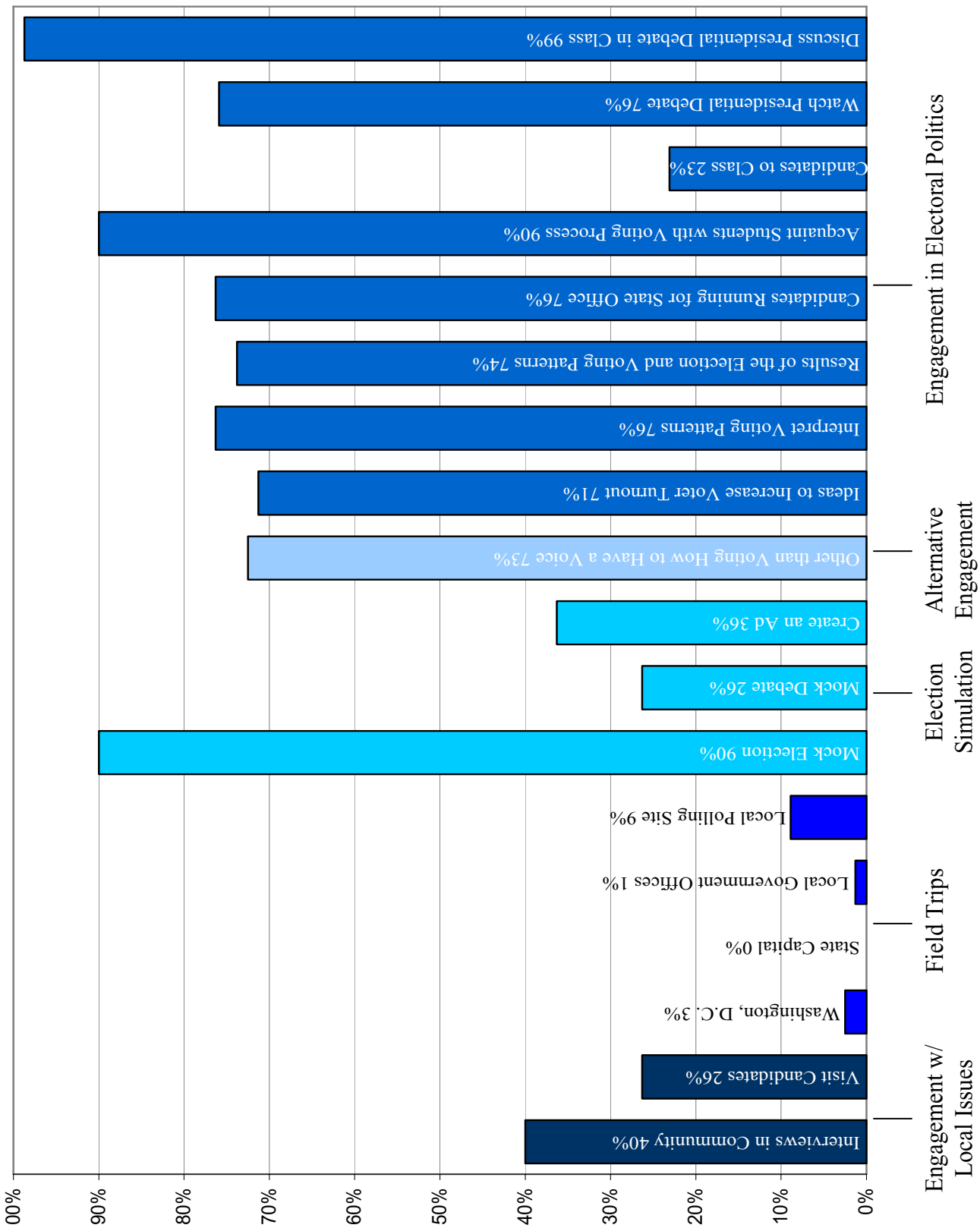


Figure 3. *Percentage of teachers who used civic engagement activities in the Fall 2004 semester.*

Table 4. *Summary of multilevel regression analyses.*

		Student Outcomes								
		Accountability	Informed Vote	Unconditional Support	Trust Elected Officials	Important to be Active in Politics	Political Efficacy	Civic Knowledge	Vote Matters	Career in Politics
Teacher Practices	Field Trips				o		–	o	o	o
	Election Simulation				o	o	o	o	o	o
	Alternative Engagement	o					+			
	Electoral Engagement	o	o	o	o		o		o	–

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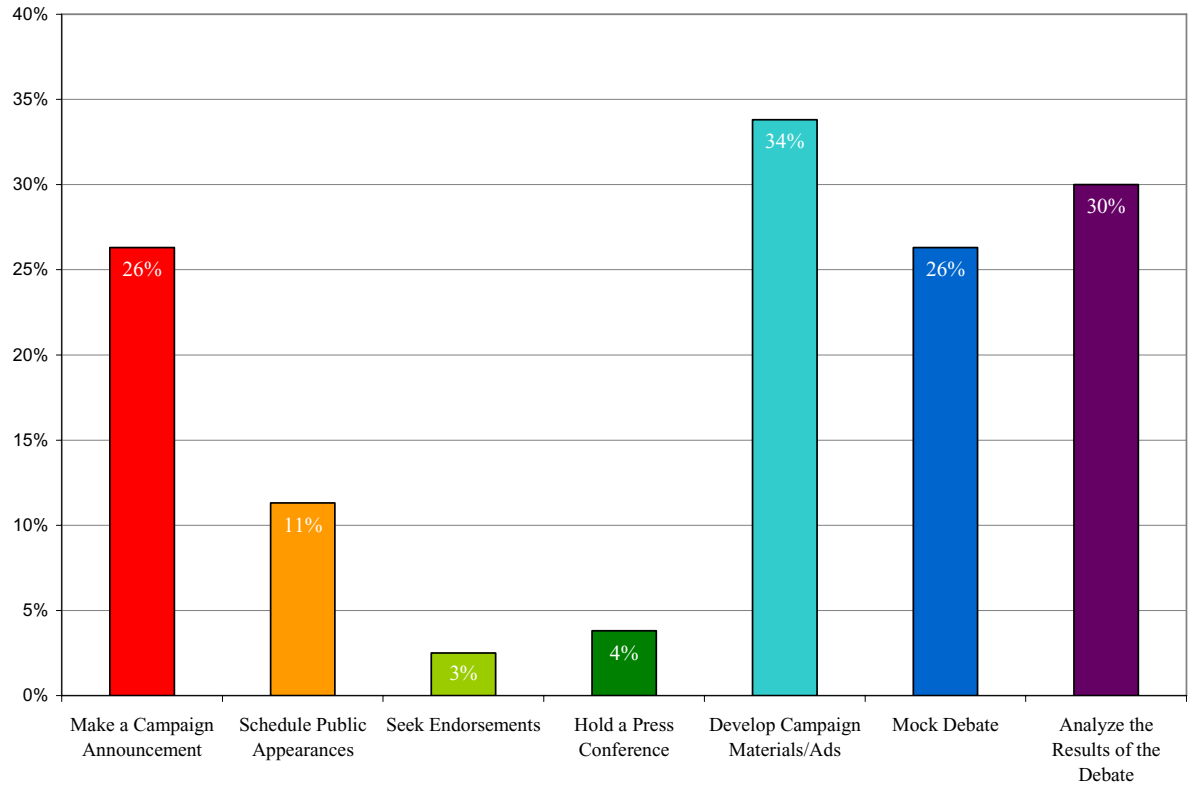
Figure 4. *Percent of teachers who conducted a mock election who also used additional activities to supplement the simulation.*



Taken together the findings indicate that engagement with electoral politics and/or field trips to government offices have a negative impact on students' sense of political efficacy and make them less likely to express interest in a career in politics. These activities provide students with opportunities to experience what it means to serve in an elected position and to see and hear first-hand accounts of the political process. Interestingly, we find that when teachers discussed concrete ways other than voting that students could have a voice in political affairs this practice yielded positive gains in students' self-reported political efficacy.

AWARENESS OF CIVIC ISSUES AND CONCEPTS

The nature of the content taught in civics and social studies classes present teachers and students with opportunities to discuss local, national, and international affairs. The six measures described in Table 5 and Figure 6 were developed to gauge the types of topics educators are discussing with their students, and what impact these discussions have on student outcomes.

TABLE 5. AWARENESS OF CIVIC ISSUES AND CONCEPTS MEASURES.

Awareness Measures	
Stem: Did students in this class...	
Discussion of Local Issues	identify issues/problems that are important?
	identify the strengths of their community?
	discuss the future of their community?
	discuss local issues in the community?
	read the local newspaper and discuss articles in class?
	gather and analyze information about a local or state issue?
Discussion of Youth Issues	discuss issues important to their generation?
	interview other students to identify what political issues are important to them?
	discuss why young people frequently do not vote?
Discussion of Contested Issues	learn about or discuss the civil rights movement?
	learn about or discuss the Patriot Act?
	learn about or discuss homeland security?
	learn about or discuss the war in Iraq?
Discussion of Basic Civic Education Concepts	learn about or discuss local government?
	learn about or discuss the electoral college?
	learn about or discuss the Constitution or the Bill of Rights?
	learn about or discuss the three braches of government in the U.S.?
	learn about or discuss their rights as citizens?
	learn about or discuss their responsibilities as citizens?
	learn about democracy as a form of government?
	learn about democracy as a way of life?
	learn about the founding principles of our nation?
	learn about our history as a nation?
Discussion of International Issues	discuss America's role in the world?
	discuss international issues?
	learn about cultures outside the U.S.?

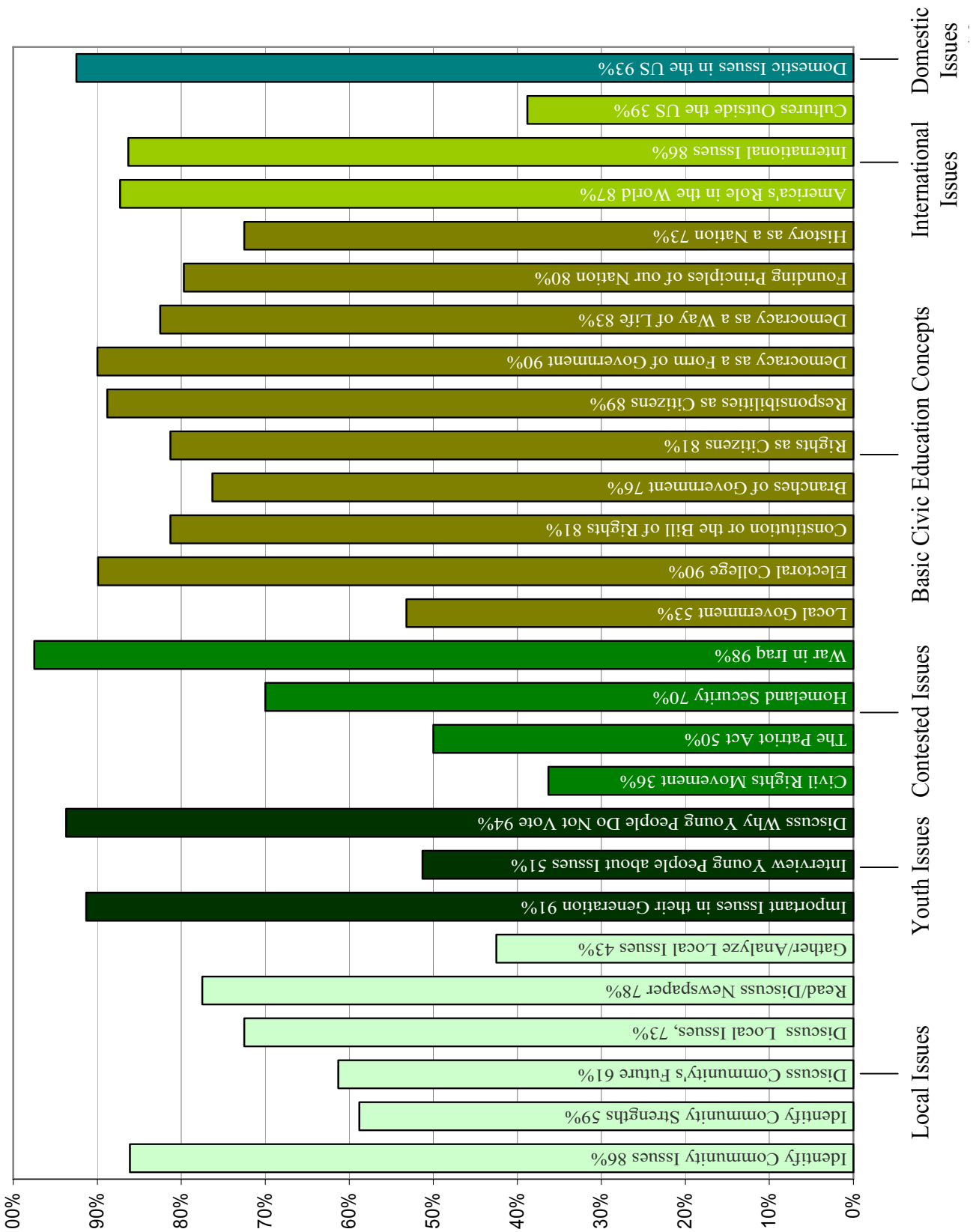


Figure 5. *Percentage of teachers who used awareness activities in the Fall 2004 semester.*

Table 6. *Summary of multilevel regression analyses.*

Teacher Practices		Student Outcomes											
		Accountability	Communication: Parent	Communication: Teacher	Communication: Friend	Communication: Classmate	Unconditional Support	Value: Helping Others	Important to be Active in Politics	Vote Matters	Engagement in Community Issues	Political Efficacy	Concern about Future	Civic Knowledge	Unjust Treatment	Trust in the American Promise
Civic Education Concepts	Local Issues	o						o		o	o					
	Youth Issues								o	o		o	o			
	Civic Education Concepts													+		
	International Issues												+			
	Contested Issues		o	o	o	o	o		o						+	o
	Current National Events	o											o			

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The results of the multilevel regressions examining the impact of various awareness practices on student outcomes are summarized in Table 6. As expected, we found that discussion of basic civic education concepts was positively related to students' civic knowledge (measured by their ability to correctly identify the governor and answer a series of basic questions about the electoral process). The results also reveal that discussion of international issues (e.g., America's role in the world, other cultures) over the course of the semester made students more likely to express concerns about their economic future (e.g., jobs, ability to support a family). Discussion of hotly contested issues such as the war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, civil rights, and homeland security positively predicted students' concern about the unjust treatment of others. This latter finding is in line with the observations of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) that involving young people in discussions of contested issues may be the best way to engage their interest. Controversy invites deliberation thereby providing students with a forum to voice their opinions and, potentially, spark their interests. Notably, none of the hypothesized relationships between discussion of national events, youth issues, and local issues with student outcomes were significant.

Table7. *Summary of multilevel regression analyses.*

		Student Outcomes										
		Accountability	Career in Government	Trust Elected Officials	Be Active in Politics	Informed Vote	Vote Matters	Serve County in the Military	SIG: Second Amendment / Firearms	SIG: Human Rights Groups	SIG: Ethnic Support Groups	Values: Race Relations
Teacher Practices	Candidate Visit	o		o			o					
	Watch Debate			o		+						
	Identify Youth Issues	o	o		o		o					
	Civil Rights Movement										o	o
	Patriot Act									o		
	Homeland Security								o			
	War in Iraq							o	o			

Legend. + = positive relationship, significant at $p \leq .10$.
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SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

To examine the impact of specific activities on student outcomes additional analyses were run (see Table 7). Only one relationship was significant: watching the presidential debate significantly and positively predicted students' self-reported confidence that they could cast an informed vote in the election.

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